



Serendipity, Sculpture, and Story

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One snowy afternoon at the close of November, I squatted next to the edge of a fallen kiva under the shelter of a red rock alcove in the upper reaches of a remote canyon in Utah. I was confused and saddened by the collapse of an ideal and an educational community in which my husband and I had invested huge amounts of time and great hopes for our children. Longing for solace, I asked whatever spirit remained in that once teeming place to remind me of a good way to live. How can one grow fully into the potential of the gift that is our life? I closed my eyes for this prayer and felt the hush of the snowfall enclose the ageless silence of the canyon. I imagined the people who had eaten, breathed, slept, argued, and died in this alcove, the questions asked, and answers provided. Opening my eyes: slow flakes, silence, a slight chill, gray green of juniper against russet canyon and, on the dirt square within my gaze, a fragment of ancient pottery. The white ground of the sherd was crossed and crossed again with black lines of varying width. Black-on-White, a name given to an archaeological period, also describes a dramatic value contrast, one of the classic principles of design. The pattern was painted by a hand that doubtless had many other duties—carrying water,

gathering wood, grinding corn, possibly soothing a baby or feeding gruel to the sick. Yet in a square inch of clay, it manifested a miracle of artistic expression: beauty made from earth and pigment. With the precision of its contrast, the strength of its line, the firmness of the stroke, that deep black of blacks, it insisted that the act of individual human expression is important. Even when there are other pressing tasks, when there are heartbreaks and children to attend, even then, especially then, a good life responds to beauty. A good life echoes back, sings out, attempts to communicate through time, some measure of one's sense of the gift that is given.

But in a cataclysmic era, we may question the relevance of art. A painting cannot serve as a tent for a family whose home was crushed by an earthquake, a play won't float a grandmother to safety from floodwaters, a poem will not return an extinct bird to its place in the ecosystem. On the surface, it appears that art will not change the prospects for a life that has been crushed by poverty, war, or racial violence. It seems that sculpture will not save the world or anyone in it.

It is likewise tempting to dismiss the importance of spending time in nature. Listening to the song of a Black-headed Grosbeak on a morning in May—indeed, *knowing* that the grosbeak would return with its gift of song on the exact day that you heard it—will not, on the face of it, lessen the intolerance that obscures our common humanity. We do not suppose the expectation of the bud's quickening in March to stop hate from metastasizing in the culture, or expect the dandelion seed head expanding like a stem-bound galaxy on the parched ground between sidewalk and gutter to stop the black child from dying in the reeking stairwell.

But, somehow, despite the fact that it will not feed, clothe, or house us, we keep making, looking at, and trying to

understand art. Art's apparent lack of functional value must belie some other worth. There must be something else life sustaining about encountering art, something about art that we need. And in this time of fascination with the virtual, when adolescents in darkened bedrooms and basements hunch blue-lit over video games to practice detached brutality, we are still inexplicably bound to nature. The first snow, the windy day in April, the panda cam, the glimpse of moon through fast moving clouds, the Facebook video of a sea turtle beginning its journey—all stir something both restive and vestigial. It starts as a small feeling in the core, a story remembered, a way back to mystery.

I am a sculptor, my medium “found objects”—things I find in thrift stores, garage sales, along trails and beaches. The things are often rusty, frequently rock hard, sometimes actual rocks. I use fabric, rubber, glass, interesting branches, guitar strings, old roller skates, lace. A couple of times I've been inspired by tar picked up from tideline. I spend my out-of-studio days finding things, and in-studio days solving problems within an aesthetic. The work is literally a balancing act—if I want it to look *x* way, I need to figure out how to connect and hold *y* and *z*. Much of the trick is, unglamorously, knowing glues. Some of it knowing tools and screws, and weights. But, way more than some artists might divulge, the process involves being led rather than actual doing. My best work happens when I follow a little not-just-me-talking voice in my head that tells me what of the many things I have pack-rat piled on tables and shelves would work just right, exactly now. And then I listen for which glue, which screw, and how. With implausible frequency, I find on some dusty thrift store shelf, or roadside, or in a box sent by a friend, just the thing I need

exactly when I need it.

Most people have experienced “finding” moments and sudden, apparently out-of-nowhere answers. My eighty-three-year-old friend, who should know from a lifetime of improbable coincidences, calls them “meant-to-be’s.” The nature of my work bids me pay special attention to happy accidents. Serendipity is the guiding twinkle of my creative process.

Long before I made sculpture, I sought to understand the world through the natural sciences, and I hoped to help save the world through sharing scientific information in such a way that my audience would be inspired to act on behalf of nature. My first real job and a career I still hold as righteous, not to mention fun, was as a national park ranger.

The world view of the artist and the environmental scientist are each based on active imagination, an imagination not springing from fantasy, but grounded in a close attention to specifics which allows the practitioner to both see what is there, and conceive what is not.

As a naturalist when I hear the downscaling song of the Canyon Wren, I recall peppery Seepwillow scenting a light breeze, the many voices in the rushing creek where I last heard the wren, footprints of heron in wet sand. The artist in me wants to give visual expression to the joy of being in a place where Seepwillow smell and water sound and ancient covenant between heron and fish are stitched together by the song of a small bird. Both approaches use the ground of sensory experience in a process that, to paraphrase Marcel Duchamp, makes the invisible visible.

I tried first to think about this essay as a paean to the practice of natural history as it contributes to my life as an artist. In that version of the story, time spent at natural history

would be sort of like showing up at a mental Pilates gym where attentiveness—a foundational attitude for the artist—strengthens its core. W. B. Yeats said, “*The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.*” The naturalist and the artist both endeavor toward senses sharpened to the magic things, we rely on the alchemy of sensory delight. We notice things and we make something of that, be it metaphor or theory.

But Pilates or parallel play are not really the nut of the matter.

The practice of art and the practice of natural history are not just parallel pursuits, and one isn’t merely preparation for the other. Art and natural history are nurtured and grow together from the very same root; a sense of immanence—that is, the awareness of the spiritual world permeating the mundane, and a feeling that the divine encompasses and is manifested in each detail of the material world. My artist self and my naturalist self are nurtured in the same belief—that spirit is fully alive in the world, is always shaping toward beauty, transcendent wholeness, and stories with unexpected endings.

Natural history is the evidence. The creative voice is the evidence. What is required of us is a willingness to cultivate serendipity.

Is there anything in the natural world that does not express with exquisite and terrible and intricately fitted loveliness? Blake’s verse rises to mind from childhood’s memory:

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

A 2005 study of European inventors found that fully fifty percent of patents resulted from a serendipitous process. Thousands of respondents said that their new ideas evolved when they were working on something unrelated. A typical example: endocrinologist Dr. John Eng noticed that certain lizard poisons damaged the pancreas. He ultimately found a compound in Gila Monster saliva that led to a treatment for diabetes. An associate describing the seemingly random discovery noted that Dr. Eng discerned “patterns that others don’t see.”

In the 1960s, Gay Talese declared that New York was a “city of things unnoticed” and set out to notice them. He encountered a colony of ants at the top of the Empire State Building, followed the wanderings of feral cats, and cataloged the providers of shoeshines. His book *New York: A Serendipiter’s Journey* cataloged the discoveries and gives us a term for someone whose senses are sharpened for delight.

For several decades Sanda Erdelez, a University of Missouri information scientist, has worked to find out if we can train ourselves to be more serendipitous. In the mid-1990s, her research focused on discovering if different people interact with the world distinctly in ways that foster or suppress serendipity. The one hundred subjects fell into three distinct groups. She called them *non-encounterers*, *occasional encounterers*, and *super encounterers*. As if watching baseball through a knothole in the fence, non-encounterers see a tightly focused world, not the whole game. Occasional encounterers might stumble upon and recognize moments of serendipity. The super encounterers reported seeing happy accidents everywhere. Here is a story of a typical happy accident in art making.

I find contemporary angel art trite, a little ridiculous, and faintly irritating. But, having never before or since thought

of creating anything to do with angels, I made a sculpture called *Angelus*. The body is a piece of Precambrian granite from the mountains near my home. I saw the stone lying on a trail and immediately thought it looked like a torso that had been knocked down or fallen from place over the ages, like an ancient Greek sibyl. I made wings from two different vintage silk scarves, hand sewn and stretched over a metal frame. Along their lower edges, to catch the light and give a sense of the mortal, I stitched a row of dangling glass beads and fish vertebrae from a necklace made by a Seri woman. But I still needed a metal piece to connect silk wings to stone back. I was thinking that maybe its shape should be the elongated triangle of a moth or butterfly body. Finding no good solutions in my studio stash, I forayed to the basement of the thrift store in town that has the best boxes of garage junk. I crossed the ill-lit room to a shelf piled with dusty boxes filled with nails, greasy screws, old files, blunted drill bits, rusty saw blades—an unglittering Golam’s pile with no ring in site, the tool bench detritus of a dozen deceased grandpas. A girl has to start somewhere, though, so I reached in.

Without even the beginnings of a satisfying, nail dirtying rummage, my hand landed on a brick pointer, a piece of metal shaped into an extended triangle. This one had the word *Angelus* incised onto it. Angel. A company named Angelus that made brick walls put their name on a moth-body-shaped brick pointer that ended up in the basement of Tattered Treasures in the very first box I touched. What are the chances?

“Creativity is another form of open space,” Terry Tempest Williams writes in *When Women Were Birds*, “whose very nature is to disturb, disrupt, and bring us to tenderness.” Super encounterers, serendipiters, pay attention and see patterns.

Awareness of serendipity is not dumb luck; it is a developable quality of mind that rises from openness to the unexpected. It is alertness to Blake's fearful symmetry, a celebration of sacred surprise, tenderness toward delight. The gift of serendipity is that we can use it to create a new story, or, in our current predicament, a new ending to the same story.

The accepted narrative of our times, a trajectory of greed, despair, and planetary ruin, is in desperate need of deflection. It is the moment for a global version of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books published in the 1980s and still popular, where the adolescent protagonist gets to make choices that determine the plot's outcome. It turns out that super encounterers get that way in part because they expect serendipity. Appreciating that they will gain new perspective, they consciously develop a capacity for noticing, for imagination, for alternate stories.

What we pay attention to, and how that affects what we choose to keep or throw away, be they materials, ideas, or specifics of the natural environment, can change the stories we tell and the possibilities we allow. With sculpture, I engage our human and environmental predicament using the incongruent beauty of the sacred found. Awareness of serendipity—that fearful symmetry in the world full of magic things—can be extended by paying attention to the immanence in the ordinary details of the world. There is no better workshop for developing this capacity than a walk in the woods, a stroll in the desert, a gaze over the ocean, or a bug's-eye view achieved by lying on the ground in a city park.

Bird watching is a sure way to extend awareness of serendipity. You never exactly know when that singing packet of heart, muscle, and bone will appear, but you prepare with map and field guide and are ready for the miracle. People who

watch birds know that small winged bodies can stitch together distant geographies by fantastical migration. Extending serendipity stretches the imagination. I imagine myself into the eyes of a migrating warbler and sense the contours of the land below, what it would be like to walk it, the feel of the shade of its trees, the smell of its watery places.

I live in Arizona, but have spent substantial time watching birds in the Carolina Lowcountry. When we have walked on a place, we can never think of it as just a shape on a map, but a fully detailed and nuanced landscape.

I can picture the pines and the oaks and the grasses and the fields and the low spots and the crabs and the high spots and the turkeys, and the herons and the warblers and the shrikes and the hawks. I can picture the dusty road and the trailer park and the church and the silent pews and the basement room and the angry boy and the loaded gun. What if the boy had opened the trailer door and found a singing bird he knew by name? What if he had expected its return and recognized the sacred in its journey and his own?

I spoke of finding new endings to stories. Many people have a dog story. Here is mine. During the years when our children were growing up and we lived next to the Granite Mountain Wilderness, the feathery red tail of a dog is always in the picture. It is most often drawing enthusiastic circles behind a compact body hopping along a trail a few yards ahead, or whapping the floor as one of the family came into the room, or balancing the funny duck and turn, full-body smile that we called Violet's "zigger dance."

The story of her arrival is legend with us: how I first saw her eight miles deep in Havasu Canyon, one of many starved "rez" dogs that my friend and I passed while backpacking, how

she somehow got to the parking lot ahead of us—we dragged our sorry selves across the asphalt filled with dusty trucks and found her sleeping in the shade of my car. Violet's story with us begins with the salami that lured her onto the back seat, the copious dog barf, the chin that rested on my shoulder as I drove the desert highway home.

I named her in the car as the sun set. Violet, for the wild flower: sweet, resilient, optimistic, persistent. Thirteen miles scabbling out a hot canyon on a shattered elbow most likely caused by human abuse, hurtling along in a smelly car at a speed completely foreign to her canyon life, and this dog chose trust.

Within a month of the surgery to remove her leg, Violet was climbing up a narrow canyon with us to a pool beneath a giant boulder with pictographs—a great spot for tree frogs. One of my favorite mental images is the deeply satisfied look when her body was fully submerged. Her head would sort of float the surface with a giant grin, completely expressive of the rare pleasure of a soak in dry country. More than once, she inspired me to take the plunge into the round swimming hole way up that canyon.

The only things that Violet truly feared were brooms, vacuum cleaners, and snakes. One day when the kids and I were plunked down picnicking on the coarse canyon sand, I idly picked up the shed skin of a Bull Snake. Violet woofed several times, meaning unmistakably: Put That Nasty Thing Down! Then, in spite of longstanding aversion, she ducked to my hands, grabbed the skin, and hopped at a fast clip down the wash to deposit it where it couldn't hurt the dumb, lovable people.

We moved into town when the kids got older and the frequent necessary drives back and forth to our home by the

wilderness became a hassle. The last years were hard on Violet's body. Her one front leg took the brunt of each step; she hurt from arthritis, much, if not all, the time. With limited motion, her exuberance extruded in jags of unjustified barking. But she played in the snow a little and zigger-danced when our son came home for a Christmas visit.

In May we walked with our grown-up kids to leave Violet's ashes at the roots of a juniper above the pool at the top of the canyon where years before she had saved me from the snake skin. The next June, Granite Mountain burned.

One day last spring, I went to keep company with our old neighbor and to take, at her suggestion, a walk out onto the mountain. I was reluctant; memories of the good young time—the kid days, the tail wag walking, picnicking in the sand, tree frog boulder pool days. Besides, the fire on Granite Mountain was the last one the nineteen young men on our city Hotshot crew fought and quelled. They walked away from the wash just hours before an even greater conflagration at Yarnell Hill took their young and laughing lives. The Prescott Hotshots saved the residential area next to the wilderness, but I had heard that all of our side of the mountain was ash and rock. I was flat out afraid to walk toward all that sorrow, did not want to invite the loss.

The creek was running high—we hopped across on rocks rolled into place for the kids years before. We walked along the old trail, between the Cliff Roses, bee-filled and buzzing, as always, and out to the one giant Ponderosa whose shade was always the first snack stop. We had named the big pine Grandpa Tree. The Grandpa Tree was burned. Not a little. Completely. In place of the red column of trunk and broad feathery crown, stood a huge black skeleton, rooted to the bare

ground and towering grandly, massively, magnificently sculptural against the cerulean Arizona sky. Forty feet above, Acorn Woodpeckers flapped and squawked in a lively aerial dance. A neighbor who stubbornly didn't evacuate during the fire said that the massive tree had "gone up like a Roman candle." Right on, Grandpa, I thought, that is one hell of a way to leave your life—with a blast and a boom to become a monument and home to families of red-capped acrobats.

We walked along the mountain's base where the hillside piñons and oaks had sheltered jackrabbits and quail and obscured the shape of the land with their bunched and rounded green. Now the forest looks like first stages in an instruction book for drawing trees—all stark lines and angles. As their blackened bark falls, the trunks and branches turn ghostly silver. We see that after the fire, the true contour of the landscape is revealed—a series of small mounds rising toward the crest and covered with waving gold grass.

We climbed above the little narrow wash and further up along the side of the canyon and the place where the round swimming hole used to be. We clambered up the big angled rock, the place with the tree frogs and that boulder with the spiral pictograph. We finally got to the flat spot above where grew the Alligator Juniper where we buried Violet's ashes.

The juniper burned way down beneath the roots. There was so much runoff after the fire that the water's force cleaned out everything to about a foot below the former ground surface. The roots were left silver and so smooth. Violet's ashes had washed away, disappeared downstream, gone with that determinedly joyful life. Nothing physical to show that she ever was, or ever was a part of us.

We stood a while in silence and looked out across the valley to the San Francisco Peaks far to the north and covered

with late snow. Before the fire the trees had obscured the far horizon, now a heart-expanding view of fifty miles.

We crossed a small rise and descended a crease in the hills, a parallel canyon. And the little canyon opened to a small wet meadow. There we stood in a sweet green bowl, last fall's yellow stems and seed heads bobbing lightly in the breeze. The ground was unexpectedly spongy. We looked to our boot toes and saw the ground at our feet thickly covered in tiny purple flowers, each bloom about the size of the nail on my little finger. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of them. Violets. Sweet, resilient, stubborn, optimistic.

In knee-high yellow grass, among the silver trees, with her flowers at my feet, I could almost see Violet hippy-hopping along with us, taking delight in a pool of water, and surveying her good world with nose to the breeze.

This day was graced with serendipity, an ordinary thing gone magic, a new and different ending to a sorry tale. We know that young men die and mountains burn. We know that life is full of sorrow and change, and we sometimes find hope that change brings new beauty.

We know that the ashes of a dog, however beloved, washed down canyon by fire and flood do not become the seeds of flowers.

But this is a true story.